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SUBJECT: FORCED GAIETY AND DOG-EARED ENGLISH BOOKS IN MARY WELAYAT

SUMMARY

¶11. (U) Emboff and P/E Assistant traveled to Mary Welayat (province) September 21-22 as part of mission trips to Turkmenistan's welayats to learn about education and cotton. The short, host government-structured trip consisted of visits to School #1, School #15 and to Mary's Agricultural Joint-Stock Company. The school visits confirmed suspicions that teachers lack adequate materials to teach English effectively and have little power over lesson content and structure due to ever-increasing political pressure within the education sector. The meeting at the Mary Agricultural Joint-Stock Company yielded what post believes to be accurate expectations about the coming year's even more disappointing cotton yields and crop distribution, and the official line on last year's disappointing harvest and subsequent government subsidies. End Summary.

MARY: READY AND WAITING TO DEFLECT OFFERS OF ASSISTANCE

¶12. (U) The trip began with a visit to specialized school #1 in Mary city, where Emboff and LES were regaled at the entrance to the school with a proclamatory reading from the Ruhnama by a band of uniformed and smiling seven-year-old students. The stiffness and artificiality of the greeting set the tone for the visit to both schools, during which Emboff was shepherded by the Ministry of Education's top welayat-level representative ("oblano") Tanryguly Myratlyev; welayat hakimlik administrative officer Ashyr Charyevich; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs chaperone Azat Niyazmuhammedov. Despite the elaborate welcome at School #1, Myratlyev seemed prepared for a grilling from Emboff and responded quickly and extensively to all questions. The oblano interpreted Emboff offers of resource and specialist assistance in English teaching as a criticism, stating more than once that this school and all others in the region are exceptionally well-equipped, that the level of education was as high as it could be and that all teachers and pupils in the region were grateful to the "Great Leader" - President Saparmurat Niyazov - for his care.

¶13. (U) According to the oblano, there are 27 schools in Mary Welayat, two of which are specialized - one laying an emphasis on technical subjects and School #1, which teaches German. There are 1300 students in School #1, and 80 teachers, 60 of which, the oblano was quick to point out, had higher education. School #15 has 1050 students, 40% of which are ethnic Russian. A similar percentage holds true for the school's teachers. The oblano volunteered that there were enough schools in Mary that every child had a short walk to school, which did not explain how specialized schools might be selective about admitting students from various regions of Mary.

MARY SCHOOLS HAVE ALL THE BASICS AND MORE!

¶14. (U) The oblano and school directors declared that Turkmenistan's

schools provided exceptional sports and arts education and extensive extracurricular activities. The basic curriculum also includes math, sciences, English, Turkmen and Russian language classes and a mandatory class on the Ruhnama. School #15 had its curriculum painted on a wall in its entry foyer.

¶15. (U) Both schools are part of InfoTuk, a UN-sponsored program that provides computers, basic computer training and ultimately Internet connectivity to select state schools across Turkmenistan. (Note: The InfoTuk program thus far extends to 10 secondary schools in Ashgabat and Mary, n one of which have Internet access. End Note.) Emboff was ushered with pride into the School #1 computer classroom, which had about ten computers, and into the two computer labs in School #15, each of which had at least six computers.

CLASSROOM TOUR: LIVING THE GOLDEN AGE

¶16. (U) Emboff visited several classrooms, including those for Ruhnama, Russian, Turkmen and English, a library, computer lab, gym and the cafeteria. Students in each classroom stood at attention and recited a short greeting in English as if apprised beforehand of this "inspection." The teachers in the classrooms appeared nervous and avowed their gratitude at Emboff's visit. Each classroom contained a Ruhnama corner or space on a classroom wall with a quotation from the book and pictures of the president or members of his family. The small one-room school library was filled with books in Russian or Turkmen written in Cyrillic and samples of the president's own works.

¶17. (U) The director of School #15 took Emboff down the "Ruhnama Hall," which was decorated with bas-relief open books depicting scenes from the Ruhnama with explanatory quotations below each scene. The school received last year's prize for best Ruhnama exhibit among schools in Mary.

ENGLISH TEACHING: TEACHERS WITHOUT RESOURCES

¶18. (U) In response to Emboff's request to speak to teachers at School #1, the school director brought six visibly nervous English teachers into the director's office and told them to present themselves to Emboff. All of the teachers brought to meet Emboff had a higher degree in English but most spoke in labored English. (Note: Peace Corps Volunteers and LES at post report that English teachers frequently possess only elementary English themselves. End Note.) The teachers reiterated the party line that they needed nothing from the Embassy or its partners, although they frequently looked to their director and the oblast for reassurance that their tack was correct. One teacher - the only male - broke from the script and suggested that the embassy set up a library of English language materials within the school for sustaining a school English club. Emboff urged the teacher to contact the embassy for information on how to do this, but did not press the point for fear of endangering the teacher, who had startled the school director by speaking up.

¶19. (U) The host government sets the curriculum for both regular and specialized state schools, and develops all textbooks. (Note: Post's primary working contact at the Ministry of Education, Nury Bayramov, has written at least one of the textbooks used in secondary schools; his English is poor. End Note.) Emboff spotted a heavily used copy of the Peace Corps Turkmenistan-produced TEFL Resources for Teachers in the English classroom viewed at School #15, but few other textbooks. (Note: In response to a stated need from local teachers, the American Corner in Mary has visited most schools in Mary and conducted training on use of this resource. End Note.)

COTTON HARVEST 2006: AVOIDING LAST YEAR'S MISTAKES

¶10. (U) Following the school visits Emboff and LES paid a visit to the Mary Agricultural Joint-Stock Company, where a discussion with Company Director Mr. Yazdurdyev included the requisite positive spin about crop yields, sales prospects and farmers' attitudes toward government policy.

¶11. (U) The company controls about two-thirds of the 180,000 hectares of land planted with cotton in Mary Welayat, with the Mary Textile Complex controlling the other 48,000 hectares of cotton fields. Of this about a quarter of the Company's crop is fine fiber cotton, which fetches 20,000 manats (about 80 cents)/kg raw or 40,000 manats (about \$1.60)/kg as fiber; regular cotton fetches half the price of fine cotton. All cotton is sold on the cotton exchange at fixed prices, which have risen over last year's because of host government attempts to encourage farmers to harvest more cotton than they did last year. Farmers should be paid in December 2006.

¶12. (U) The company's representatives insisted that all cotton sales were already accounted for, with companies such as Reinhart, Olam, Dunavant, based in Germany and Switzerland, buying most of the crop. The company's representatives acknowledged the difficulties in the harvest payment terms during 2005 but were positive that 2006 would be different (Comment: 2006 is worse. End Comment). This year, the AJSC had to use letter of credit terms. Next year, buyers will be willing to make advance payments, because "they now know us."

¶13. (U) There are 46,000 tenants working by contract with the company, and the company said there are growing numbers of families in Mary who grow cotton on their personal lands because it is profitable. Hand-picking is preferred for the harder-to-harvest fine cotton; the company uses both hand-picking and combines for harvesting. After the meeting, Ashyr Charyevich took Emboff on a tour of two nearby cotton fields -- one that had been sown with mostly fine and some regular cotton, and the other with regular cotton. In the latter there was a family with a mother and a couple of her children hand-picking the cotton. (Note: The Mary American Corner's planned TEFL Resources training for the teachers of Turkmengala region is on hold in October because teachers around Mary are required to help harvest cotton at this time. End Note.)

COMMENT

¶13. (U) While trying to present a united front against embassy outreach efforts, the education officials and teachers Emboff met in Mary revealed the stark fear under which they daily operate, in contrast with representatives at the much more relaxed atmosphere Agricultural Joint-Stock Company meeting. Subsequent to the day's meetings, Azat Niyazmuhammedov told FSN that he had hinted to Emboff's hosts that they should "show true Mary hospitality" -- an exhortation that likely resulted in the embarrassingly forced display of welcome at Schools #1 and #15. At the end of the visit to School #1, the school director took a framed photo montage off the wall in her office and showed it with aggressive pride to Emboff: it was a collage of photograph cutouts depicting President Niyazov and children from the school on the tarmac at Mary Airport. Although a clearly fabricated "photograph," the Director took pains to point out details in the farcical photo to Emboff and proclaim that the Great Leader had graced the school with a visit -- evidence of the president's high regard for education. Clearly the anxiety with which administrators try to cover up a lack of materials and access to modern teaching methods reveals that the opposite is true.
End Comment.

¶14. (U) Dushanbe minimize considered.

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